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Meet the MasterMinds: Charles Green on Who and Why Clients Trust

Charles H. Green is founder and President of [Trusted Advisor Associates](#), author of [Trust-based Selling](#)[®], and coauthor of [The Trusted Advisor](#), with David Maister and Robert Galford. Green, a speaker and seminar leader for major consulting organizations, spent nineteen years with the MAC Group and Gemini Consulting.

Green sees a link between a seller's level of self-orientation and sales success. We talked to Green about how consultants can reap the benefits of client relationships based on mutual trust.

MCNews: How do you define trust-based selling, particularly as it differs from traditional sales approaches?

Green: I would point out three contrasts. First, trust-based selling is a practice, not a process. Second, it's about relationships and not transactions; and third it's about serving clients, not serving the seller.

Selling is usually taught as a business process. That is, you follow the left-to-right arrow from step one to step two and so on. The next-to-last step is always closing, and then there's a feedback loop.

Trust-based selling, on the other hand, is all about values, mindset, attitudes, and why you're in the business. And it's process-neutral. I like to say you can graft trust-based selling onto any other sales approach as long as it is not self-serving and greedy.

As to the second point, if you focus solely on the transaction with a client, you will choke off the relationship. Often the approach to selling is what's in it for me? How do I get the sale, win the deal, or close the transaction? That ends up being overwhelmingly about you, not the client.

But if you really focus on serving your client, you will in turn be more than fairly rewarded for doing that. You have to trust that, if you keep doing the right thing for the client, in the end, that will be in your best interests too.

MCNews: Is it your sense that consultants don't use a trust-based selling approach?

Green: Too many consultancies focus on the micro-level, for example, how to align business processes and interactions to achieve greater profitability. That works great when you're talking

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about supply chain management, but it backfires on you when you apply it to dealing with human beings.

If you examine every aspect of your behavior vis-à-vis your clients in terms of how profitable the next minute of conversation will be for you, that turns people off. Selling complicated services requires a different profit model.

MCNews: Trust is a central theme of the book, and we do want clients to trust us. But don't you also have to be able to trust your client?

Green: Yes, trust should be a two-way street. Trust is a relationship noun. It can't exist by itself. There has to be another party. It can't be I trust you but you always take advantage of me.

Somebody has to take the first step, though, and it's got to be the consultant. If you're interested in developing a relationship, you have to be willing to take the first risk to offer something up.

There's a catch-22 at work in trust: you get back what you put out. If you're really afraid of some bad outcome, that's what you're going to get. If you behave as if you trust somebody, you're more likely to get trust back.

So I'd say you have to lead. If you are extremely cautious and careful, you'll get somebody on the other side reacting exactly the same way. Personally, I have found this to be true, and most people nod their heads when I say so.

If you behave in a trustworthy manner, including putting yourself somewhat at risk emotionally, something like 80-90 percent of the time people respond in kind. Very few people are actually out to get you.

MCNews: Are there situations when a trusting relationship works with a client and other times it just doesn't?

Green: Yes. And there's nothing wrong with that. Some clients may say look, I just want a commercial relationship, particularly for a small, retail transaction.

Consultants still need to step out across the line and, where it's appropriate, offer a more substantial relationship. If the client responds with "appreciate it, but no thanks"—there's nothing lost. Now if the response is mean or evil, wish that person on your competitor and walk away.

Most people are not like that. I think about three-quarters of clients in the consulting world prefer to work with us on a relationship basis rather than a purely arms-length transactional one. That's true for government markets too, by the way, not just private companies.

MCNews: Some consultants try to build relationships by wining and dining clients. Do you think such interactions lead to trusting relationships?

Green: No, I don't think so. You can do all the drinking you want with people or spend afternoons on the golf course with them and it doesn't necessarily create trusting relationships.

I think there is a useful distinction between what I call personal and private activities. Private stuff would include sports tickets and even things like memorizing your client's kids' names. That's completely up to the consultant and the client and what works for them. I don't have anything to say about that, good or bad.

Trust is built on the personal: You must connect with others as individual human beings. You should not view a client as just a wallet with legs—somebody to fill out your sales quota.

If you view clients as objects, or sources of financial compensation for you, that will come through and they will not trust you.

MCNews: Do you have any thoughts about how consultants ought to think about trust-based selling when there's a procurement officer between the consultant and the decision maker?

Green: Yeah, absolutely. That's clearly becoming more and more of an issue. The procurement officer is the new client.

Think about it from the procurement officer's perspective. First of all, you've got a lonely job. Every vendor is trying to get around, over, or through you—to bypass you with all the connections they have. Worse yet, internally not only do you have pressure to get the lowest cost, you have a huge amount of pressure not to pick the wrong vendor.

And I think we as consultants forget. We think we're getting beat up for price. They get beat up a whole lot worse if they make the wrong decision on the vendor they choose.

The simple answer is to treat the procurement person right. You should be thinking about how to make that person's life easier just as you would for any client. That includes not only being responsive to questions and respectful of the person's requirements, but also freely and genuinely offering them useful advice.

MCNews: Consultants are often advised that it's best to quote a price only after they understand what needs to be done and the value they will generate. What is your perspective?

Green: It's true that clients can't make good decisions until they understand both the price and the value. But a sales approach that says you shouldn't quote price until you've established value is rooted in the misguided psychology of control.

From a trust perspective, price is the biggest bugaboo—the topic we're all afraid of broaching. That sets up the psychological dynamic of everybody talking around things and waiting to hear the big number at the end of the report. That causes more damage to the creation of trust than the mention of the number itself.

I suggest that you get price out in the open sooner rather than later. One way you can do that is to humorously provide a reality check. My preferred line is, "Before we go too far and one of us embarrasses ourselves, I have the sense that this is a low six-digit number. Are we within the right range or are we off by a couple of orders of magnitude?"

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You can make light of it but you've gotten it out there, which is the point. Every once in a while, the client will say, "Six-digit...I was thinking four-digit," in which case both parties are glad I mentioned it. Then you can say I must have misunderstood, talk to me some more about what you need.

Price is the first thing clients want to talk about and the last thing consultants want to talk about, which means you are in conflict right away. It also means you're destroying trust every step of the way. The antidote is to get it out there.

MCNews: You've said consultants should replace qualifying leads with marketing. Could you elaborate on that?

Green: Most approaches to selling are rooted in efficiency more than effectiveness. When you put efficiency and transactions together, you get the qualification approach. The objective of that is to get through leads as quickly as possible to maximize the number of leads you get to and focus your scarce resources on the few that give you the biggest payoff.

That is completely self-oriented and pays no attention to the impact of blowing off people in the qualification process. Let's say somebody calls you and it's clear you are not a fit for the project in question. Instead of saying, "Sorry that's not what we do, have a good life" and hanging up, be willing to give a few minutes of your time.

Ask the caller to explain a little bit more about the situation, and offer to help. Maybe you can provide a few names or suggest items to research further. If you're willing to invest five or ten minutes, you create a marketing opportunity.

Even if the person is not a potential client for you in the future, he will have good things to say about you and your firm to someone else who might be. What would you pay for somebody to hand you a set of one-step-removed leads where all you have to do is talk off the top of your head for ten minutes? That's powerful marketing and yet we blow it off with this efficiency-obsessed focus on qualifying leads.

MCNews: Many experts coach consultants to create a rehearsed elevator speech. You have said that is not the best use of someone's time and effort. What's the alternative?

Green: Well, you should have a rehearsed spiel down for certain circumstances, but this particular notion, the elevator speech, has become such an iconic example that we almost do take it literally. Imagine you are a CEO going up in an elevator and some egocentric, obsessed stranger comes up to you and starts babbling about her expertise. How would you react?

MCNews: I'd want to get off the elevator.

Green: Absolutely—push the next button to get off as soon as possible. I can't imagine a more egocentric, non-client focused mentality, even if it isn't literally the situation of riding up in the elevator with a CEO. After all, that is meant to be somewhat metaphorical. Nonetheless, that attitude carries over and you see this behavior all the time.

“The most powerful component of trust is your low level of self-orientation, and if you're curious, self-orientation approaches zero.”

All my clients, bar none, spend way too much time blathering on about themselves in presentations and pitches. One of the fundamental things that we must learn as a profession is to remember that they don't care that much about us; they care about themselves.

The antidote is to design, not just the elevator speech but all of your conversations, to turn the topic around to them, understanding them, and asking them questions.

MCNews: If you could give a consultant one piece of advice about the trust-based selling approach, what would it be?

Green: Cultivate an attitude of inordinate curiosity. You can train yourself to become more curious. Make a list of questions for all your clients, and have them in your back pocket.

Go through one or two of those questions every time you interact with a client. Good things happen when you're curious. Of course, you learn more about your client because self is everybody's favorite subject. You also begin to get more insights. You generate answers,

opinions, or points of view, which are valuable in their own right and, in turn, lead to more opportunities.

The most powerful component of trust is your low level of self-orientation, and if you're curious, self-orientation approaches zero. Then your orientation is the client, not only in business but in your personal attitudes.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

Find out more about Charles Green at www.trustedadvisor.com.